

# EQ Review

Educational Quality in the Developing World



*EQ Review is a bimonthly newsletter published by USAID's EQUIP1 to share knowledge about issues fundamental to improving educational quality and to communicate the successes, challenges, and lessons learned by USAID Missions.*

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## Cluster Schools & Teacher Professional Development

### An Introduction

School-based and cluster teacher inservice professional development programs have become widespread and popular in recent years in both industrialized and developing countries. In the past, teacher in-service programs often have been neglected in developing countries where budgets were heavily frontloaded in favor of pre-service programs. After initial preparation, teachers typically received little or no further professional support. There has been a shift in this tendency in recent years, with inservice programs receiving increased attention and budget.

Several elements have come together and created the environment for the change, prompting us to value and support teachers in new ways and to recognize the necessity for ongoing career-long support programs. These elements include

- Widespread curriculum reforms that emphasize active learning and the accompanying necessity of rapid and effective teacher change;
- Growing realization of the central role of teacher quality in improving overall educational quality;
- Career-long ongoing teacher professional development now viewed as a necessity in order to improve teacher quality and therefore educational quality;
- Rapid expansion of student enrollments requiring much larger numbers of teachers and the necessity of finding ways to support relatively inexperienced or “unqualified” teachers;

- Declining quality as a consequence of rapidly expanding quantity of education in the absence of sufficient resources; and
- Willingness on the part of governments and donors to invest in teacher quality.

In response to these challenges, many countries are turning to more decentralized and localized forms of teacher support. These inservice programs follow a wide variety of patterns that include groups of teachers working together to improve their practice at a single school, teachers working together in clusters of several (or many) schools, or a combination of the two.

Facilitation of and involvement in these programs is usually highly participatory and carried out by the teachers themselves, master teachers, and outside advisors using support materials that give basic information on innovative practice and provide suggestions for the sessions. The approach to teacher learning embedded in this methodology follows participatory, student-centered, active-learning patterns for adult learners that parallel the new active learning approaches that teachers are learning to implement in their own classrooms.

The curricula and content of these inservice programs vary from (i) *ad hoc* and loosely organized, to (ii) partially or wholly structured around teachers' expressed needs, to (iii) highly structured programs that are closely related to the curriculum of preservice teacher education. Programs are supported by a variety of teacher-learning materials including printed materials, radio support, or multimedia kits. Sharing of experiences and communal problem solving are central to these programs.

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# Cluster Schools & Teacher Professional Development

## Professional Development Clusters Become Teacher Learning Communities in Guinea

In 1997 the Government of the Republic of Guinea and USAID/Guinea launched the Fundamental Quality and Equity Levels (FQEL) project to improve teaching and learning at the elementary level. The project uses a unique, multi-pronged approach to achieve its goals, including the institution of professional development clusters or *grappes*.

Clusters were introduced in 1999 so that all elementary teachers could benefit from on-going in-service professional development programs. Today, some 25,000 teachers gather with colleagues from neighboring schools on a bi-monthly basis to explore new instructional practices. The 1,342 clusters provide a much-appreciated mechanism for professional dialogue and collaborative problem solving, particularly in isolated rural areas.

A number of features were instituted to ensure that the clusters became learning communities. First, schools within a cluster were asked to take turns hosting the bimonthly meetings, including providing a noonday meal for their visiting colleagues. Second, a highly respected principal or teacher leader from a cluster school was appointed to facilitate the sessions. Third, two powerful professional learning strategies were instituted: round table discussions and peer observations.

Each bimonthly meeting begins with a round table. Cluster leaders invite teachers to share their experiences in putting new ideas into practice: What new strategies or approaches have they tried recently? What worked, what didn't, and why? Through the exchanges, participants celebrate their successes and engage in joint problem solving. As well, twice a year they visit a cluster colleague's classroom to observe the new approaches and strategies in action.

The cluster system has changed teachers' practices and the way they talk about teaching, something that Norma Evans, FQEL Teacher Education Advisor, attributes to the strong professional relationships developed through the cluster system. "It's now acceptable to say that teaching is hard and you don't always get it right the first time. Without the cluster system, I don't think that would have happened."

For more information, contact Ahmed Tibiane Diallo at [ahdiallo@usaid.gov](mailto:ahdiallo@usaid.gov).

To learn about the overall FQEL program, visit <http://ies.edc.org/projects/guineaFQEL.htm>



A new EQUIP1 working paper, "School- and Cluster-based Teacher Professional Development: Bringing Teacher Learning to the Schools" by James MacNeil of World Education, reviews school and cluster-based teacher development programs and evaluates their effectiveness. The paper also identifies gaps in our knowledge and key issues for policymakers to consider.

For information from the USAID/EGAT/ED conference session on the School-based and Cluster Inservice Programs, visit the [EQUIP1 website](#).

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# Cluster Schools & Teacher Professional Development

## Cluster Schools Break Down Age-Old Barriers

### *Introduction continued from page 1*

Frequency of teacher meetings varies widely from several times a week combined with frequent cluster meetings to weekly to perhaps as often as once every few weeks or once a month. Factors that influence program vigor and success include organization and leadership; the supply of support material; the degree of system support; and teacher incentives, which may include covering teachers' costs through payment of per diem, reimbursing travel expenses, certifying teachers for attendance, or officially recognizing and praising teachers' participation.

Geography is of particular concern in determining how frequently cluster inservice events can take place, especially since teachers in widely dispersed schools in very remote areas probably cannot meet as frequently as those in more densely populated areas.

School-based and cluster inservice programs are very popular with teachers who are accustomed to receiving little professional attention and to working in isolation. Teachers welcome information on how to understand and implement reforms for which they have no practical preparation and no available models. Teachers react positively to the opportunity to learn and to the regard for their professional worth that such programs signal.

Despite the rapid growth of school- and cluster-based teacher inservice programs in developing countries and their popularity among teachers, there are many outstanding questions about their organization, content, effectiveness, cost, and sustainability. Information is scarce on these issues and what we know is largely anecdotal. For example, sustainability issues can be obscured by the fact that school-based and cluster programs are widely supported by outside donors and thus governments may choose to budget their limited funds elsewhere. Investigation of all of these issues is imperative if the approach is to continue and to thrive effectively.

Teacher quality is now seen as central to education quality. One of the ways to improve teacher quality is by working with current teachers as well as with preservice education centers. School-based and cluster inservice teacher education works with teachers where they are, allowing them to collaborate with their peers, practice in their classrooms, and build a local resource network with each other.

For more information, contact Elizabeth Leu at [eleu@aed.org](mailto:eleu@aed.org).

To meet the high social demand for education, and to offset a weak state capacity to provide broad access to primary schooling, the Government of Haiti invited private, and in particular religious, organizations to offer schooling opportunities to children. As a result, private schools now account for over 80% of primary schools in Haiti. Religious institutions, NGOs, communities, and individual proprietors support these non-public schools. The combination of these various efforts results in a highly fragmented school system. Schools in close geographic proximity may never work together on common problems facing their communities.

When USAID/Haiti and its partners implemented a cluster school approach, complete with education programs for school directors, pedagogic teams, and PTAs, and related support and monitoring in classrooms, relationships among schools started to change. In Haiti's program, all schools in a cluster were granted equal status—no school served as a center of excellence or was accorded special standing. This very democratic approach to school clusters fostered real change at the school and community levels.

For more information, contact Grace Lang at [glang@usaid.gov](mailto:glang@usaid.gov).

Proceedings from the upcoming EQUIP1 videoconference on the topic of school-based and cluster professional development that will be held June 2, 2004, at the Howard University Global Development Learning Network will be available afterwards on the [EQUIP1 website](#).

For an in-depth analysis of how in-service teacher professional development models have been affected by changes in our understanding of teaching and learning and by shifts to decentralized models of school governance, read the EQUIP1 Issues Brief "The Patterns and Purposes of School-based and Cluster Teacher Professional Development Programs" by Elizabeth Leu, Academy for Educational Development.

# Cluster Schools & Teacher Professional Development

## Clustering in Early Learning Environments in Pakistan

The Releasing Confidence and Creativity (RCC) program is a USAID-funded initiative in Pakistan implemented by the Aga Khan Foundation. The program seeks to build sound foundations for early learning through work with government schools, policy engagement, and networking around early childhood issues in Pakistan. Six program partners are working in 100 government schools in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan to give support during the earliest years of primary school. By training teachers and administrators, mobilizing communities, and engaging local government officials, the program seeks to improve learning environments and produce lessons that will lead the government to replicate its successes.

Schools are clustered together in the program in order to organize activities, such as teacher education, informational sessions with local government leaders, and community events. The benefits of grouping schools have been seen in several aspects of the program. Clustering has facilitated resource mobilization for early childhood education activities in program schools, as well as for nearby schools, by targeting key local decision-makers in a given geographic area. Furthermore, targeting community activities to groups of schools at the same time has increased local ownership of the program. Coordinated awareness campaigns, school competitions, and community participation efforts have generated enthusiasm among parents by increasing their involvement and investment in the wider program's success.

The RCC program has also effectively used clustering approaches to encourage professional exchange and support of teachers, school administrators, and local government officials. Cluster-based training and regular exchange visits of professionals within a cluster has helped to create support networks whereby successes and challenges can be shared and discussed. Implementing partners have also found that cluster-based activities facilitate their own monitoring and advocacy functions by encouraging more self-assessment and promotion of program aims at the school level.

For teachers in particular, the program has used a combination of lead teacher/mentor teacher arrangements where a trained professional travels throughout a cluster to share experiences and provide feedback and support. This facilitates peer learning and effective mentoring.

Moreover, key teacher resources are distributed on a cluster basis, so that program inputs are cost-effective and a community of learning among teachers is encouraged. Initial program results have shown that the extent to which teachers are using child-friendly teaching practices is often consistent across clusters, demonstrating how cluster-based support can be an effective strategy for integrating new teaching methods.

Creating meaningful school clusters in the isolated, rural environments where RCC is working has not been without its challenges, and RCC partners have found that positive outcomes in the program have created demand from local authorities to increase the number of schools in a cluster. Partners often have to balance these requests with the need to keep clusters at an appropriate size that will maintain their flexibility, accommodate needs of teachers, and stimulate sharing among schools.

Nonetheless, cluster-based approaches to program delivery have been well received. Through continued encouragement of innovation, RCC hopes that cluster-based approaches will contribute to the government's thinking about cost-effective modes of delivering support to early learning in Pakistan.

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